

Girl Power in *Ascendance of a Bookworm*

Jennifer Angelica

English Department, Faculty of Humanities and Creative Industries, Petra Christian University,
Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya 60236, INDONESIA

Email: A11180037@john.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Anime originates from Japan and has been deeply rooted as a culture since the 1990s (JW-Magazine, 2021). *Ascendance of a Bookworm* is an *isekai anime*, a fantasy sub-genre which is booming right now. In this anime series, Myne had grown up in a poor family who had no right to speak and had no education. Despite the condition however, Myne is confident and forthright, as most young women in her previous world tended to be more open and vocal in expressing their emotions. To analyze this anime, I will use girl power from two different sources; Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, and Emilie Zaslow. My analysis will show that Myne has girl power characteristics in her and how her girl power affects other people around her. This thesis will end with a conclusion that the characteristics can be found everywhere and the effects it has, whether positive or negative.

Keywords: anime; Girl Power; fantasy genre

INTRODUCTION

Anime in Japanese is a collapsed form of the English term “animation” and means all kinds of animation films (O’ohagan, 2007). The word refers to a specific style of cartoon produced or inspired by Japanese animation which is usually adapted from light novels, *mangas* or Japanese comics, video games, and other media. One example of video games to manga to anime adaptation is *Pokémon* (O’ohagan, 2007). Various genres are presented in stories in anime films: one of them is the fantasy genre.

Quoted in the journal *Do you believe in magic? The Potency of the Fantasy Genre* (2016), Rosemary Jackson claimed that “As a critical term, ‘fantasy’ has been applied rather broadly to any literature that does not prioritize realistic interpretation: myths, legends, folk and fairy tales, utopian allegories, dream visions, surrealist texts, science fiction, horror stories, all presenting realms ‘other’ than the human.” A few examples: *Ancient Magus Bride* which is about a skeleton mage who fell in love with his human apprentice, *My Hero Academia* which shows that a superpower can be passed down via eating hair. *Fruit Basket* which shows a human family that can turn into zodiac animals via hugs, et cetera. Thus, since the fantasy genre in anime can be about everything “logical breaker,” anime breaks down the one big genre into smaller ones; for example, *isekai* genre which is a subgenre of fantasy.

In Japanese, *isekai* means different world (Lu, 2020) or a strange world, is a genre of fantasy anime where a character travels from the world they know to an unfamiliar one. Typically, *isekai* series will place a person in a magical realm of fantasy, and occasionally, it happens in reverse. It is a subgenre of fantasy in which a protagonist, or group of characters, end up in a fantasy world from the real world.

Ascendance of a Bookworm is one of the few examples of *isekai* animes. It is a fantasy-*isekai* anime written by Miya Kazuki which highlights the life of Myne, a five-year-old girl who tries to achieve her dream. In this anime series, Myne had grown up in a poor family who had no right to speak and had no education. Despite the condition, Myne was confident and

forthright, as most young women in her previous world tended to be more open and vocal in expressing their emotions. Therefore, when she landed in this current world, she decided to do everything she needed; be confident and persuasive.

ANALYSIS

Girl power is something that is a very popular topic which is discussed everywhere, even in anime. In general knowledge, girl power mainly talks about the strength a young woman can emit as well as empowering other women. More so in modern society, girl power usually is connected with fun, confidence, and, often, beauty. However, girl power does not stop just around that point. In this chapter, I will explore and give examples about the *Ascendance of a Bookworm*'s main character, Myne, and her girl power. There are two parts in this section: Myne's ways of showing her girl power and the effects of girl power on others. These two parts are divided again into smaller sections. I will use both pictures and dialogues as evidence to analyze deeper.

In this section, I want to discuss Myne's several ways of showing her inner girl power. This point will be divided into three sub-points which are: Myne's confidence, Myne's independence, and Myne's power.

Myne's Confidence

Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2020) mentioned that girl power's characteristic is confidence. They mentioned that women should have the mindset of "girls can do anything boys can." To support this point, Zaslow (2011) mentioned that "girls today can-do great things if they believe in themselves." This can be interpreted as girls believing in themselves and their abilities to the point of being able to do things boys usually do – or are able to do. Being confident means having infinite doubt in oneself because one knows the limit of one's ability. Being confident does not mean being arrogant, however, since with being confident, one does not only boast and talk about one's "imaginary" power or ability, but instead, proof it with achieving the target or the goal.

Myne's unwavering confidence can be seen when she is discussing and negotiating with a senior merchant about her paper proposal. The example of Myne's confidence can be seen in Episode 6 when she gave out her idea of selling paper made of plants. In this series, paper or parchment was usually made from animal skin and thus made the price very high. There was not anyone who made paper from plants, therefore, her statement came as surprising. However, Myne knew she had the capability to make this work, thus, she explained her proposal confidently.

MYNE I'm thinking of making and selling paper that's not made from animal skin.
 BENNO Paper that's not from animal skin?
 MYNE Yes. I will make paper from plants.
 BENNO Did you say from plants?!
 MYNE Yes. I'll be able to get the price lower than that of parchment, so it'll probably be a profitable commodity.
 BENNO So, how are you going to make it? I want to see the actual thing. Do you have any?
 MYNE Not at the moment. Next summer, before our baptisms, we'll make a prototype, so please make your decision based on whether it can be used or not. (*Ascendance of a Bookworm*, 2019, Episode 6, 10:41-11:25)

When Myne proposed her suggestion about making paper that is not from animal skin, the people around her were surprised since it was such a unique idea. As people only thought

that paper could be made using animal skin, Myne's idea of using plants struck them. Myne confidently proposed her idea despite the circumstances. Throughout the whole interview conversation, Myne showed her professional side; standing straight and tall with a smile on her face. Her voice was also clear, calm, yet bright. Myne was not only able to explain calmly and confidently about her proposal, but she also managed to answer all of the questions Benno threw at her. She did not waver or stutter in the face of an obstacle, instead, she fought it head-on. It showed how much she believed in her ability in making the paper from plants work. She was confident in herself that she could make it happen. Thus, Myne's way of showing her confidence is through both dialogues and actions.

Myne's Independence

Zaslow (2011) suggested another characteristic of girl power which is independence. She mentioned that what girl power discourse suggests is to be strong, and to be a strong woman means to function independently rather than interdependently. She also mentioned that being independent did not only mean that one would do things themselves, but being independent could be interpreted as taking charge of everything; emotionally, spiritually, physically, financially, et cetera which can be claimed that being independent is to lead one's life however one's desires. Zaslow also did not forget to involve some examples which include celebrity moms who are raising children without men or other partners, and female relatives who have broken from the norm and chosen less traditional work-family balancing acts as strong, independent women. She also stated that being independent is to live without financial and emotional support from those who could provide it. Thus, it can be interpreted as being independent means women who act, live, and do things for themselves, by themselves, and to themselves.

Myne's independence can be seen when she tries to do things without getting help from others. As a child born in a low-income family, there were not a lot of things her family could give her. However, that was what pushed Myne to do things by herself. Of course, as someone who was born weak, the other people around her tended to help her, just like Lutz. When he found out that Myne tried to do some heavy work like shoveling, he decided to help her to lighten the burden on her body. However, Myne still did some work and not only watched him do things.

Myne was financially independent. As she was poor and books could only be read by rich people, Myne decided to make her own money by selling and producing her products. She worked hard and received her rewards. She did not ask for money from her parents, rather, she made her own money through her hard work. Her independent side at this point comes from her financial situation. Rather than asking her parents for money, she worked hard to earn them herself. Another example was when she decided to sell the hair ornament that she made. As she had earned her own money, she could even buy people clothes and lunches. It shows that her financial situation was stable enough that she did not have to think about spending money on her retainers.

Myne's ability to think independently can be seen when she is negotiating and discussing business deals. Being independent in thought can be interpreted that Myne could think for herself – without external influence. Myne calculated and thought things through by herself and did not get swayed by other people's opinions. She also did not just agree to things unconditionally, but rather, calmly but firmly assessed the situation to get what she wanted. She did not let the opinion of others influence her.

Myne's Power

Emilie Zaslow (2011), on the other hand, believed that girl power's characteristics are powerful. However, powerful can have several meanings. Zaslow gave several examples of powerful women: a wife who survived a rough marriage with a drug-addicted husband, a girl who is resistive towards patriarchal oppression and voiced her voice, and a lady who is physically powerful/strong. Therefore, it can be interpreted that powerful does not have to be someone who has strong power, but someone who is able to retaliate to the oppressor when suppressed, someone who is able to stand up for themselves, and someone who does not give up are all people who can be called powerful. Being powerful also can be interpreted as someone who has enough authority to oppress or make people follow what they say; however, this point can mean two different ways – bad or good, depending on how the individual ends the command. It can end up in either one being a wise leader or one being a tyrant. Therefore, the effect does not only end in a positive way, but it can also have a negative effect if not careful.

Myne's powerful side can be seen in two different ways. One, Myne used her powerful magic to attack and suppress the Bishop that he almost died of suffocation. Naturally, someone who was suppressed would shrink back and would not be able to do anything, let alone retaliate. However, Myne was someone who treasured those around her, therefore, for someone to want to harm her beloved ones, she did a counterattack to save her parents. Thus, Myne's powerful side can be seen through her action. Another way of seeing her powerful side is through her words and stance. She spoke with her back straight and took a step forward which could be seen as an aggressive move (since it was also combined with her attack). Her words were filled with power to show her attacker that she was not afraid. Another example was in the next scene when she mentioned that the Bishop should know that he should prepare to die when he carelessly ordered to kill people.

MYNE You tried to kill a person. Naturally, you should be prepared to be killed yourself too, shouldn't you? (*Ascendance of a Bookworm*, 2019, Episode 14, 13:27-13:49)

Myne's strong statement, a stance which was borderline arrogant as she was looking down on the Bishop, and even vibe can be seen as powerful. At this point, Myne became even more aggressive when she noticed that her magic could seriously hurt and even kill someone without her having to lay a hand on the said person. She was benevolent towards people who deserved it, but for those who did not, she was merciless.

Myne disciplined the bad children. Another example of Myne's powerful side can be seen through episode 19 when Myne met the children of the orphanage for the first time. As a businesswoman as well as the orphanage children, Myne decided to make use of the human resources there for a win-win situation; Myne got the employees and the children could live better and even earn money themselves. Thus, Myne put the first order as the orphanage director to the children there to start cleaning up the orphanage, but she did not forget to add that for people who worked, there would be rewards.

MYNE This isn't the grace of the gods. Rewards are not equal! Those who work not, eat not. If you don't work, you won't be getting any rewards. Everyone, please remember that! (*Ascendance of a Bookworm*, 2019, Episode 19, 05:53-07:51)

Myne taught the children indirectly that they needed to work to get the payment as the rewards she promised were not the same as the grace of the gods the church implemented. We can see her powerful side from her speeches and the firmness she radiated. However, she did not bully the weak. She gave the children another chance to get their act together and put her words inside their head that she was not joking around. As someone who had once lived in the modern

world, she could be considered an adult – thus, it also affected her way of deciding certain things and how she did things. At this point, she needed to make the children obey her words so that they could work efficiently and thus, bring out the maximum benefits for her. She was cool-headed but still stern when she disciplined the children. She did not sway when the others tried to corner her with their numbers, but she explained to them that she was the one with the authority and that it would be better if the children were to realize that.

Myne had a powerful mentality. Zaslow mentioned that being powerful can mean that the individual had a strong mind – someone who did not succumb towards anything, and kept on fighting, not giving up halfway. In episode 10 when Myne oppressed her own illness, we can see that she was not someone who had a weak heart that would fall into her own disease – even though it was incurable. Myne’s powerful side can be seen through her willpower in order to keep her illness in check. She did not give up even though she knew her fever came out even more often, instead, she calmed herself down so that she could trap her illness back inside. From this point, we can see Myne’s powerful side from different aspects; including her powerful magic, willpower, and determination.

Myne’s Impacts on Others

Girl power does not only affect the individual involved, but it can also influence those around them. In the anime series, Myne had various people surrounding her; her family, her friends, the merchants, the church, et cetera. Through this point, I want to discuss more how Myne’s girl power affected the people surrounding her to show different effects on different people. Myne had managed to change other people’s lives, though for better and for worse.

Myne created confidence in Lutz. As someone who was close to Myne, he was influenced by her eventually – whether directly or indirectly. Myne created confidence in Lutz in several ways: (1) Myne gave him support by holding his hand when he was nervous. (2) Myne boosted his confidence by making him feel needed. (3) Giving advice about making a good first impression when Lutz was about to have a meeting with Benno and Otto. (4) She also prepared him well by giving him a hair treatment to make him look presentable and nice. However, the most impactful one was still (5) Myne’s confidence made Lutz braver and more confident himself. The effect of Myne’s moral support and presence gave Lutz a boost in his confidence. We can see Lutz became braver and had more confidence in himself through Episode 6 when he introduced himself to both Otto and Benno in their first meeting. Lutz calmly but also confidently introduced himself; his voice was loud and clear without a hint of hesitation. His eyes also looked confident and determined. This showed that Myne’s confident side was reassuring for him and that it made him able to believe in himself more. As Lutz built his confidence, Lutz became braver and more outspoken. From these pieces of evidence, we can see how Lutz grew into an outspoken, brave boy who could speak his mind without hesitation. He spoke his mind with a laidback attitude and uttered them without any other thought. It was an upgrade from his stiff and nervous self. Thus, Myne’s girl power influenced Lutz to be more outspoken.

Myne managed to save the dying orphanage in the church. As someone who was independent whether it was physical, financial, or even mental, Myne never let herself be dragged around with others. Through this point, the effect of Myne’s ability to think independently had on other people: the children in the church’s orphanage. We can see in Episode 18 and 19 when Myne, the orphanage director, decided to save the dying orphanage because no one ever took care of it and the children living inside the orphanage. The orphanage’s children became bright and confident. Myne’s decision to take over the orphanage not only managed to change the children's lives, but they also changed their attitudes. We can

see it through Episode 19 when the children finally went back to the orphanage after they had collected tree branches needed to make papers. Through this evidence, we can see that the boys had such a good time that they even managed to boast about their achievements. Through this section, we can see that Myne's girl power which is independent has effects on other people: the children in the orphanage. Before they met Myne, they were gloomy and dirty, they were showing signs of malnourishment, but Myne managed to save them and even changed their lives in the one moment she decided that she could not bear to leave the children alone to die. Moreover, the effect of her decision made the children brighter and gained confidence.

Myne managed to scare the Bishop away with her magic power. The last but not least characteristic girl power has is powerful. In this point, Myne's powerful side came from her powerful magic power which could harm others; in this context, the Bishop. As the Bishop had evil intentions towards Myne and her family, thus, made her angry and that made her magic power go out of control. Myne treasured those around her, therefore, when she knew that someone had the intention to harm her loved ones, she intended to punish him. Through this point, the first effect Myne's powerful side had on others was to scare the bad guy which was the Bishop. He stuttered and scrambled backwards when he saw Myne stepped closer to him. His expression also easily showed how scared he was to Myne with his eyes open wide and his pupils shrunken.

CONCLUSION

Ascendance of a Bookworm's is a product of popular culture that has a clear message to promote girl power. The promotion of girl power can be clearly seen in the portrayal of the main character, Myne, a girl from the contemporary world, who is transmigrated to the past. Not only she is mentally transmigrated, but she also brings her values or her girl power with her. Myne brings her confidence, independence, and powerful with her. She shows her confidence by being outspoken and brave, and she is also knowledgeable, which gives her confidence a boost. She shows her independence by being physically, mentally, and financially independent. Myne also has her magical power and the power to influence others. Her ability to influence the people in her current world and changes their way of thinking, shows girl power to be empowering. Thus, it can be assumed that this anime is a media that is used to promote girl power.

REFERENCES

- Baumgardner, J., & Richards, A. (2010). *Manifesta: Young women, feminism, and the future*. Macmillan.
- Zaslow, E. (2017). *Playing with America's doll: A cultural analysis of the American girl collection*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lu, C. (2020). *The darker sides of the Isekai genre: An examination of the power of anime and manga*.
- Oóhagan, D. M. (2007). Manga, anime and video games: Globalizing Japanese cultural production. *Perspectives*, 14(4), 242-247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09076760708669041>
- Stephan, M. (2016). Do you believe in magic? The potency of the fantasy genre. *Coolabah*, (18). <https://doi.org/10.1344/co2016183-15>